The blues: Duke Ellington

by Stacy Schulman

(Editor's note: The following article is part three of a series on blues. It is continued from last week).

I'd like to turn now to two Black artists--Duke Ellington and B.B. King, and discuss these aspects of commercialism and professionalism.

Duke Ellington organized his first group shortly after World War I. At this time, he came in contact with "the peculiarly American style of cultural exploitation." Harold Cruse, in THE CRISIS OF THE AMERICAN NEGRO INTELLECTUAL: "The role of Negro as entertainer is still being used, manipulated, and exploited by the whites. Negro entertainment talent is more creative, more original, more spontaneous, more colorful and more plentiful than that of any other ethnic group. It is so plentiful... that white brokers buy Negro entertainment cheaply, and sell it high, as in the case of Sammy Davis Jr. But there is only one Sammy Davis. In the shadows, a multitude of lesser colored lights are plugging away, hoping against hope to make it big, for the white culture brokers only allow a few to break through, thus creating an artificial scarcity of a cultural product. Negro entertainment posed such an ominous threat to the white cultural ego, the staid western standards of art, cultural values and aesthetic integrity, that the entire source had to be stringently controlled." Despite these harsh realities of American commercialism, Ellington's band is the only one, black or white, to survive without interruptions for some fifty years. One can see why the blacks have come to regard him as a Cultural hero.

The Duke's music has always told what it is like to be black in a white America. Once, during a Club engagement, he registered a protest against prevailing attempts at racial exploitation. Playing a typically dissonant chord on the piano, the Duke said: "That's the Negro's life, hear that chord. Thats us. Dissonance is our way of life in America. We are something apart, yet an integral part."

Duke Ellington rose out of the Harlem Renaissance in 1920. "Unfulfilled promises of Democracy had created a deep pessimism among black people after the Reconstruction period. Black people struggled to overcome the repressive conditions with a variety of action programs. (Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DeBois, and Marcus Garvey.)" All these ideologies blended into one common idea; "That if black and white could be educated to the black mans' worth, discrimination could be ended once and for all," COMMUNICATION--through music, art, or whatever, this is the only REAL answer. This idea gave rise to the Harlem Renaissance and to Duke Ellington. Through his music of the 1920's Ellington reached whitemen like Ernest Hemmingway, who, disillusioned with post-war America, saw in Black music a great escape from their pessimistic realities.

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